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ANNA WALCZUK
Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie
e-mail: anna.walczuk@uj.edu.pl

Gilbert Keith Chesterton – the Edwardian Champion for Europe

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to look at the relevance of Gilbert Keith Chesterton's literary output for the present day discussion of the foundations and future prospects of Europe. Chesterton was wholeheartedly dedicated to the cause of Europe at the time where such commitment, especially in the Englishman, was a mark of eccentricity rather than a reflection of widespread tendencies. Looking for the roots of European identity Chesterton stresses the formative impetus coming from Greek, Roman and Christian traditions. Consequently he stresses the significance of such European values as democracy, reason and the fundamental worth of person. From the impressive body of his writing: fiction, non-fiction, poetry and journalism, Chesterton emerges as a steadfast glorifier of Europe. However, the outlines of Chesterton's Europe are arbitrary for they do not correspond to any geographical or political criteria. Chesterton, the ardent debater, posits his own idealised version of Europe which he sets out to defend against various manifestations of 'non-European' barbarism. His intellectual exuberance make him an unfaltering supporter of the European cause who deserves to be rediscovered and newly appreciated in the turbulent world of the 21st century.

Key words: G.K. Chesterton, 20th century English literature, Europe, Christianity, civilisation, democracy, reason.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936) was one of the most influential writers and colourful figures on the English literary scene in the first three decades of the twentieth century. He has come to be known not only as a versatile man of letters and master of paradox but also a great debater, involved in important social and political issues of his time. Chesterton's prolific literary output comprises about 80 published books of imaginative and non-fictional prose, well over a hundred short stories, several hundred poems, and about four thousand essays. He was also a graphic artist and a caricaturist who studied drawing at the Slade School of Art in London. Though he did not have any formal philosophical training, his book on St. Thomas Aquinas was acclaimed by a famous French thomist philosopher,

Etienne Gilson, the best book on St. Thomas that has ever been written.[1] Unsurprisingly, Chesterton earned the name of a 'colossal genius', as if the force of the sole word 'genius' was not enough and it had to be reinforced by the adjective 'colossal', which in a double meaning was also allusive to his great size. He left a lasting mark on the intellectual and cultural climate of his time; he had opponents and admirers, but hardly anybody could remain indifferent when confronted with his potent voice of a visionary artist and a spokesman for ideas in which he firmly believed. Chesterton's greatness was acknowledged even by those, like T.S. Eliot, who stood on the opposite end of Chesterton's anti-modernist aesthetics. His lasting influence was recognized by Elizabeth Jennings, a distinguished poet, who attributes her first acute experience of poetry to the reading of Chesterton's *Lepanto*.[2] On account of his versatility and a broad range of interests, Chesterton fully deserves to be called a man of the Renaissance if by that term one means somebody who in the diversity of commitments, depth of vision and intensity of personal involvements markedly exceeds what is the prevailing average of his own epoch.

Among many different approaches to his genius, Chesterton can be best described above all by two words related to two realities they represent, i.e. 'Europeanism' and 'Christianity'. In Chesterton's mind, as it is reflected throughout his artistic and intellectual activity, these two notions are closely interconnected. From the impressive corpus of his writing G.K. Chesterton emerges as a great European, cultivating and promoting the idea of Europe. The Europe which he believed in, and to some extent invented, not only grows upon the foundations of ancient Greek and Roman civilisation, but also, even more importantly, finds its completion in Christianity, where it bears the best fruit for humanity and culture. It is a point of interest that Chesterton's thinking had been Christian a long time before he formally entered the Roman Catholic Church.[3] It is worth emphasising at this point that Chesterton believed in one Europe, and the concepts of Western and Eastern Europe were entirely alien to him. In the idiom of his imaginative and argumentative writing Chesterton voiced the idea of the spiritual and intellectual community of all Europeans. Notably, he was doing it at the time when a sense of Europe, common European heritage and European unity, as we know it nowadays, was not yet fully awakened in the world.[4] A prolific writer, G.K.

[1] In her extensive and highly reliable biography of G.K. Chesterton Maisie Ward quotes Etienne Gilson (1884–1978): "Chesterton makes one despair. I have been studying St. Thomas all my life and I could never have written such a book" (M. Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, London 1944, p. 525).

[2] See E. Jennings, *Let's Have Some Poetry!*, London 1960, p. 13, 14.

[3] G.K. Chesterton entered the Roman Catholic Church (due to the influence of his wife Frances, along the path which led from agnosticism through Anglicanism) in 1922, while his *Orthodoxy* was published in 1908.

[4] Let it suffice to say that it was ten years after Chesterton's death, i.e. in 1946, after the Second World War, that Winston Churchill made a pioneering statement about the necessity of creating a common European body in the likeness of the United States of America; and in 1949 the Council of Europe was called into existence with the aim of solving current problems at the European level.

Chesterton cherished the view, later spelled out by Jean Paul Sartre, that there is no art for art's sake, and that all art should be committed. Accordingly, his own writing shows strong commitments to the cause of Europe rooted in the spiritual legacy of Christianity.

The following discussion is going to look closer at the nature of Chesterton's Europeanism, and furthermore at the relevance of his work for the present day discussion of the foundations and future prospects of Europe. Since Chesterton himself showed and frequently declared his fascination with the Middle Ages, there is good reason to view his championing of the European cause within the frame of a chivalric adventure and the mood of medieval romance which underlie a great deal of his poetry and prose. Therefore I propose to look upon G.K. Chesterton in the light of a medieval knight wandering the lands of his beloved and undoubtedly idealised Europe, and fighting with monsters that threaten her true identity, security and welfare. Such perspective seems be wholly justified for Chesterton himself most often looks upon the broad spectrum of European problems not so much as a historian, sociologist, or political scientist, but primarily as a poet. Hence his writing demonstrates two essential attributes of poetry: firstly, it shows an exceptional insight, bordering on a visionary perception, into the real nature and metaphysical status of things presented; secondly it is characterised by a specific use of language, not only charged with high-pitched rhetoric, but also frequently departing from the conventional and commonly accepted patterns of denotation. The figurative language of poetry, which Chesterton uses in his polemics, may sometimes lead to a misunderstzxanding and a distorted interpretation of some of his arguments.

What is Europe? The definition based upon purely geographical criteria describes it as one of the seven continents of the Earth and the world's second smallest in terms of area, bounded to the north by the Arctic Ocean, to the west by the Atlantic Ocean, to the south by the Mediterranean Sea, to the southeast by the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea, while to the east it is divided from Asia by the Ural Mountains, the Ural River and the Caspian Sea. However, we all feel that the simplest definition based upon purely geographical criteria in fact tells us very little about European identity. G.K. Chesterton was also acutely aware of a cultural inadequacy and fundamental insufficiency of definitions that are based on merely scientific factors. That is why in order to give some clear outlines of Europe Chesterton adopts a poetic and transcendent perspective. In consequence, his discourse is often empowered by the strategies of defamiliarisation. As a result social, political or historical facts he talks about are always presented from the vantage point of his vision.

In keeping with such perspective Chesterton professes that "things of our country are often distant, but the things of our cosmos are always near".[5] Europe, which Chesterton glorifies and defends against forces inimical to her true self, is

[5] Chesterton G.K., *The New Jerusalem* (1920), New York 1921, p. 187.

a product of such visionary frame of mind which superimposes the ideal upon geographical or political actuality. However, Europe construed in the mind of Chesterton and expressed in imaginative terms, though sometimes considerably removed from experienced and scientifically verifiable reality, is far from a poetically ambiguous, or otherwise enigmatic concept. On the contrary, it has a very clear and definite shape which stretches around the Mediterranean, in which Chesterton perceives "not merely the sea in the middle of the land, but more especially the sea in the middle of all lands that mattered most to civilisation. […] that blue sea [which] has run like a blue thread through all the tapestries of our traditions".[6] He makes the same point talking about ancient monuments in modern Europe: "The important thing about France and England is not that they have Roman remains. They are Roman remains".[7] However, the crucial point of Chesterton's worldview is that beside the formative significance of Greek and Roman tradition, the main outlines of Europe rest upon the cornerstone of Christianity, in which Chesterton sees "above all the philosophy of shapes and the enemy of shapelessness".[8]

In his *Autobiography* Chesterton confesses how as a little boy he was attracted to the toy theatre with the figure of a man with the key. Later he made that key which unlocks all doors a symbol of Christianity. Fascinated by the symbol of the key remembered from his childhood, Chesterton in his mature prose claims that it "[can] unlock the prison of the whole world; and let in the white daylight of liberty".[9] The deep-seated conviction of the indissoluble bond between Christianity and Europe, conceived in terms of a spiritual construct, runs through all Chesterton's work. Christopher Hollis is perfectly right when he claims that "Europe to him was Christendom".[10] That conviction gets spelled out succinctly in his book on St. Thomas Aquinas where Chesterton declares: "Incarnation had become the idea that is central in our civilisation".[11] Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), Chesterton's friend, accurately summarises such vision of Europe by pointing to the fact that for Chesterton Europe has invariably been the Roman Empire baptised.

Therefore Christianity viewed against the background of Greek and Roman antiquity occupies the central position in Chesterton's reflections upon the nature of Europe. Inquiring in his non-fictional prose into what Christianity has done to the making of Europe Chesterton comes to the conclusion that the main ideas of Christianity have become the building blocks of the European civilisation for they lie at the origin of European achievements and typically European institutions.[12]

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[6] Ibid., p. 168, 169.

[7] G.K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England*, London 1917, p. 9.

[8] G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (1925), London 1974, p. 214.

[9] Ibid., p. 213.

[10] Ch. Hollis, *The Mind of Chesterton*. Coral Gables 1970, p. 142.

[11] G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (1933), New York 1956, p. 119.

[12] It is interesting to note close parallels between G.K. Chesterton's vision of Europe, very often expressed in poetic terms, and the views of the distinguished British scholar, sociologist and historian

In his peculiar rhetoric, aimed at producing an initial shock in the audience, and frequently resorting to paradox and the figure of hyperbole, Chesterton solemnly declares: "Everything else in the modern world is of Christian origin, even everything that seems most anti-Christian. The French revolution is of Christian origin. The newspaper is of Christian origin. The anarchists are of Christian origin. Physical science is of Christian origin. The attack on Christianity is of Christian origin".[13]

Unsurprisingly, Chesterton treats his journey to the Holy Land – the cradle of Christianity, in symbolic terms as a pilgrimage to the sources of the European civilisation.[14] It helped him rediscover a common spiritual bond of Europe stemming from the same roots and manifesting itself in the same crucial concepts which he saw as fundamental for European identity. They comprise democracy and personal freedom, wise trust in reason and unshaken belief in the unsurpassed worth and personal uniqueness of each human being. In Chesterton's view they all contribute to that unquenchable source of a civilising energy which has been sustaining Europe ever since the beginning of the Christian era.

Although Chesterton is aware of various abuses and misuses of reason, he does not cease to praise Europe for her "rationalistic tastes" which were put to very good use by St. Thomas Aquinas. Chesterton admires the great Dominican philosopher and claims, accordingly, that entering Aquinas' world of reason is "like escaping from a scuffle in a dark room into the broad daylight".[15] Chesterton distinguishes between what he calls "insane" and "sane" reason. He is convinced that the former corrupts the European ideal and at the same time sees the latter as most naturally combined with what he himself calls "the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy".[16]

Chesterton's continually reasserted reverence for the inherent dignity of mankind runs alongside his abhorrence of the idea of Superman and the resulting revulsion against all forms of despotism and tyranny. That is why the Europe which he launches on the pages of his impressive *oeuvre* is steeped in democratic spirit. However, democracy which Chesterton holds in high esteem consists in having "democratic emotion," rather than merely democratic institutions or a democratic system. In another book of biography, analogous to *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Ches-

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of culture, Christopher Dawson (1889–1970), the author of such books as e.g.: *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the History of European Unity* (1932), *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (1950) and *Understanding Europe* (1952).

[13] G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, New York 1905, p. 157.

[14] Chesterton travelled to the Holy Land in 1919 and in the course of that journey he saw a number of similar posters reappearing along his itinerary, and all devoted to the question of liberty. Looking at them he observes, what later he records as a startling discovery, namely that a great number of significant European ideas, such as liberty, can be traced back to Palestine which is the cradle of Christianity (see *The New Jerusalem*).

[15] G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, op. cit. p. 171.

[16] Chesterton G.K., *Orthodoxy* (1908), London 1909, p. 183. One chapter in G.K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* is entitled *The Romance of Orthodoxy*.

terton pays tribute to St. Francis of Assisi, whom he sees as naturally equipped with the democratic instinct which generates a sense of brotherhood and openness to other human beings as well as the attitude of respect for man's natural environment. Chesterton places St. Francis among great historical figures whom he recognises as founders of Europeanism. Consequently, he portrays St. Francis as a man who filled with the Christian spirit becomes an outstanding and authentic exponent of the ideas of genuine equality, freedom, and brotherhood, which in modern society tend to be reduced to attractive, but often empty, catchwords. Yet, interestingly, in spite of all his appreciation of St. Francis, Chesterton proclaims: "the Pope was right when he insisted that the world was not made only for Franciscans".[17] Thus he becomes a spokesman for pluralism, asserting his belief in the absolute necessity of preserving variety and distinctness of things because only then the richness of the multicultural dimension of the European mode of life can be secured. G.K. Chesterton's fantasy novel, *Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), provides a compelling illustration of the author's dedication to the cause of pluralism and democracy at the level of imaginative prose.

In European tradition, as Chesterton perceives it, democratic emotion is closely connected with the belief in man's grandeur and dignity: "though the most mystical, it is also the most practical summary of equality that all men bear the image of the King of kings", Chesterton claims in *A Short History of England* (202).[18] Christianity taught Chesterton to see in each man a unique being in whom greatness is mixed with weakness, and he eagerly attributes that perception to the make-up of Europe. Moreover, with a deep concern for the weak and underprivileged, typical of a Christian knight, Chesterton stresses that European culture has a special regard for each average man whom he calls "the common man". The defence of the common man was one of the main issues in Chesterton's on-going controversy with G.B. Shaw:

Mr Shaw cannot understand that the thing which is valuable and lovable in our eyes is man – the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable man. And the things that have been founded on this creature immortally remain; the things that have been founded on the fancy of the Superman have died with the dying civilisations which alone have given them birth.[19]

The common man figures in Chesterton's mind when in his discussion of the economic project known as 'distributism' he speaks of property as a moral extension of personality. Chesterton markedly has no sympathy either for great and uniform masses, or for great empires. He is convinced that truly democratic emotion and meaningful personal relations are possible only in small communities. That is why he finds in the Greek *polis* and the medieval parish the best formations for

[17] G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923), London 1924, p. 174.
[18] G.K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England*, op. cit., p. 202.
[19] G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, op. cit., p. 67.

carrying out his ideals, and that is also the reason why he nostalgically looks back to the Middle Ages as the lost Paradise of Europe.

According to Chesterton Europe lives by the adherence to the values which have become constituent elements of her own identity. Whenever they are wasted or jeopardised, Europe betrays her own Europeanism and becomes less European. The danger of losing the bright face of European civilisation depicted by Chesterton in his literary works, concerns all nations and states of Europe in so far as they are not faithful to the European ideal. Chesterton presents the European nations that dissipated their life-giving legacy and as a result found themselves on the brink of precipice and on the way back to barbarism, in the poem *The Queen of Seven Swords* where seven Christian knights representing seven European nations, Spain, Italy, France, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, having squandered their spiritual heritage, come to the Virgin Mary, and ask for help:

> We have lost our swords in the battle; we have broken our hearts in the world
> Since first we went forth from thy face with the gonfalon's gold unfurled,
> Disarmed and distraught and dissundered thy paladins come
> From the lands where the gods sit silent […].[20]

If Chesterton can be viewed in terms of a knight fighting with the dragons of nihilism, depersonalisation, uniformity and various forms of insanity in political and social life that threaten the ideal Europe to which he swears his unconditional allegiance, then it must be emphasised that he is a merry knight, filled with a profound sense of joy. That metaphysical elation stemming from the very fact of taking part in the most unusual adventure of life shines through his verse, fiction as well as his non-fiction prose and essays. It represents that quintessentially poetic mind-set known as a sense of wonder, that has become his distinctive characteristic, and which was regarded by Plato as a true beginning of philosophy. It finds its reflection in Chesterton's much quoted exuberance. More importantly, however, Chesterton wants to see in it one of the distinctive properties of the European mind, and at the same time the fountainhead of a civilising impetus for the European culture.

Without any doubt Chesterton's Europe is the Omphalos, the heart and the centre, of the world. Chesterton portrays it as the mankind's spiritual and intellectual treasury from which the rest of the world can draw inspiration. If that sounds unfair to other cultures and civilisations, it may be remembered that in his argumentative prose Chesterton uses the deviant language of poetry which by definition ought to be allowed poetic licence. Just as the Europe evoked in his writing does not correspond to the physical outlines of the particular geographical entity, so similarly other geographical terms like Asia, China, Japan, are used arbitrarily, in the manner of symbols or contracted verbal forms for more elaborate abstract concepts. In other words, they function as practical strategic points in Chesterton's battlefield of argument. That is why everything that does not meet

[20] G.K. Chesterton, *The Queen of Seven Swords*, London 1926, p. 50.

Chesterton's ideal of Europe is immediately qualified as non-European. Thus when Chesterton attacks what in his discourse is termed as the "Asiatic" idea of melting all individuality into impersonal uniformity, in reality he is not speaking disparagingly about Asia. In reality Chesterton's specific idiom represents his poetic warning addressed to Europe against embracing such modes of life which would place the anonymous mass higher than the individual human person; and furthermore against the persistent danger of putting whatever form of totalitarian despotism above democracy. In the same vein, though perhaps not so unsympathetic to the other culture, Chesterton points to Japan and solemnly proclaims in *Orthodoxy* that being progressive there means simply being European. Likewise, whenever he talks about the Great War he always regards it in terms of the war which Europe was fighting against barbarianism. Chesterton therefore does not hesitate to put forward the claim that war-waging Prussia, like Asia and China, is alien to the European spirit.[21] Similarly, he condemns the involvement of England in the Boer War for he sees in it an act of disloyalty to Europe and a shocking instance of debasing the European notion of freedom. Evidently Chesterton's rhetoric is charged with the stylistic figure of hyperbole wherein lie simultaneously the power and the weakness of his argumentative prose.

It may be the most unfortunate blunder of Chesterton – the knight-errant wandering in the imaginary lands of European values – that he located in particular places having their proper names, such as Asia, all those negative tendencies which he saw as jeopardising the integrity of European culture and civilisation that he held in high esteem. Chesterton was fond of repeating that people did not love Rome because it was great, but Rome was great because it was loved by its citizens. A similar claim can be ventured to describe Chesterton's attitude to Europe. The entire literary heritage of G.K. Chesterton bespeaks an Englishman who loves Europe in spite of her weaknesses, betrayals and painful departures from the ideal he has set up. And Europe for him becomes great, exceptional and superior only through that love.

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